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FROM WHOM NO SECRETS?

Spy-scares are a double-edged weapon. It is salutary to be reminded that the KGB never sleeps in its attempts to penetrate our secrets. It provides irrefutable evidence with which to confront facile cynics who pretend Britain no longer has any secrets worth preserving. Yet the reaction a batch of court cases can produce creates a jumpy, irrational atmosphere in which to look to our defences.

No screening system is without flaws. The KGB has its fellow countrymen wired for sound and a brutal way of dealing with suspects. Yet, they have their defectors too. Britain was ludicrously underprotected in the 1930s when Stanley Baldwin disowned his Secretary of State for War, Duff Cooper, in the Commons for suggesting checks should be made.

Positive vetting, invented when the failures of the thirties came home to haunt the forties and fifties, has been greatly refined over 30 years. But more could be done to increase its efficacy without creating an atmosphere of paranoia in the public service. Lord Bridge of Harwich, who is leading the Security Commission inquiry into the Prime affair, and Sir Timothy Kitson, chairman of the Commons Defence Committee investigation of positive vetting, should consider a couple of possibilities.

The Prime case, like many others in the sorry story of British penetration, showed that psychological problems can go with the propensity to betray. Every candidate who passes through the Civil Service Selection Board en route to top posts in the Home Civil Service, the Diplomatic Service, MI5, MI6 and the Government Communications Headquarters, undergoes a series of tests and interviews. The procedure includes an interview with a psychologist. With minimum fuss and cost, the board's psychologists could be asked to bear the security angle in mind when framing their questions.

Lord Diplock was right to recommend that the numbers vetted should be reduced; 68,000 is too many. But the Government should not cut the number of investigating officers as a result. Some should be redeployed on a new, deeper-vetting process, for officials in an inner-ring of super-sensitive jobs, modelled on the procedure applied to Polaris submarine commanders before they are let loose in the North Atlantic with the British deterrent. It involves investigating officers visiting many more character witnesses than the three suggested by the sailors plus subjecting them to psychological screening.

Lie detectors, bugs and pavement artists should be left to the tyrannies. This kind of surveillance could be appropriate when active suspicions of espionage are involved, but not before. The system should be made as moleproof as possible, but not at the price of liberty and due process. If Lord Bridge and Sir Timothy Kitson are looking for a work of practical philosophy to guide their investigations, they should send for Edward Shils's classic study, *The Torment of Secrecy*, written at the height of the McCarthy hysteria.

He wrote:

"As long as the dangers of espionage exist, ie as long as we have some knowledge which a potential enemy desires, which can do us harm when it is in his possession and which he cannot obtain except by espionage, we will have a genuine security problem. As long as the genuine security problem exists there will be persons whose imagination will be set boiling with excited apprehension."

Nervous minds, he said, must not be allowed to dictate policy, which must be directed to keeping a limited range of genuinely sensitive material secret and preventing persons of subversive intentions or propensities from appointment to jobs with access to it. Those words would read well in a White Paper once Lord Bridge and Sir Timothy have reported.